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THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR DELIVERING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY INTERVENTIONS

Clare Smith Carnegie Faculty, Leeds Metropolitan University



c.f.smith@leedsmet.ac.uk

What’s on your mind?

BACKGROUND

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Physical inactivity is a local, national and global issue and contributed to over five million premature deaths worldwide in 2008 (HSE, 2013). The benefits of physical activity (PA) have been described as threefold; primary and secondary prevention of major chronic diseases; mental and physical health benefits and increased life expectancy (McLachlan and Hagger, 2011).

Marcus, Owen, Forsyth, Cavill and Fridinger (1998) stated that cost-effective methods were required for PA interventions targeting the wider population. The use of Social networking sites, for example Facebook and Twitter has increased (see Fig. 1) (ONS, 2013) and provides a potential vehicle for delivery of PA interventions.

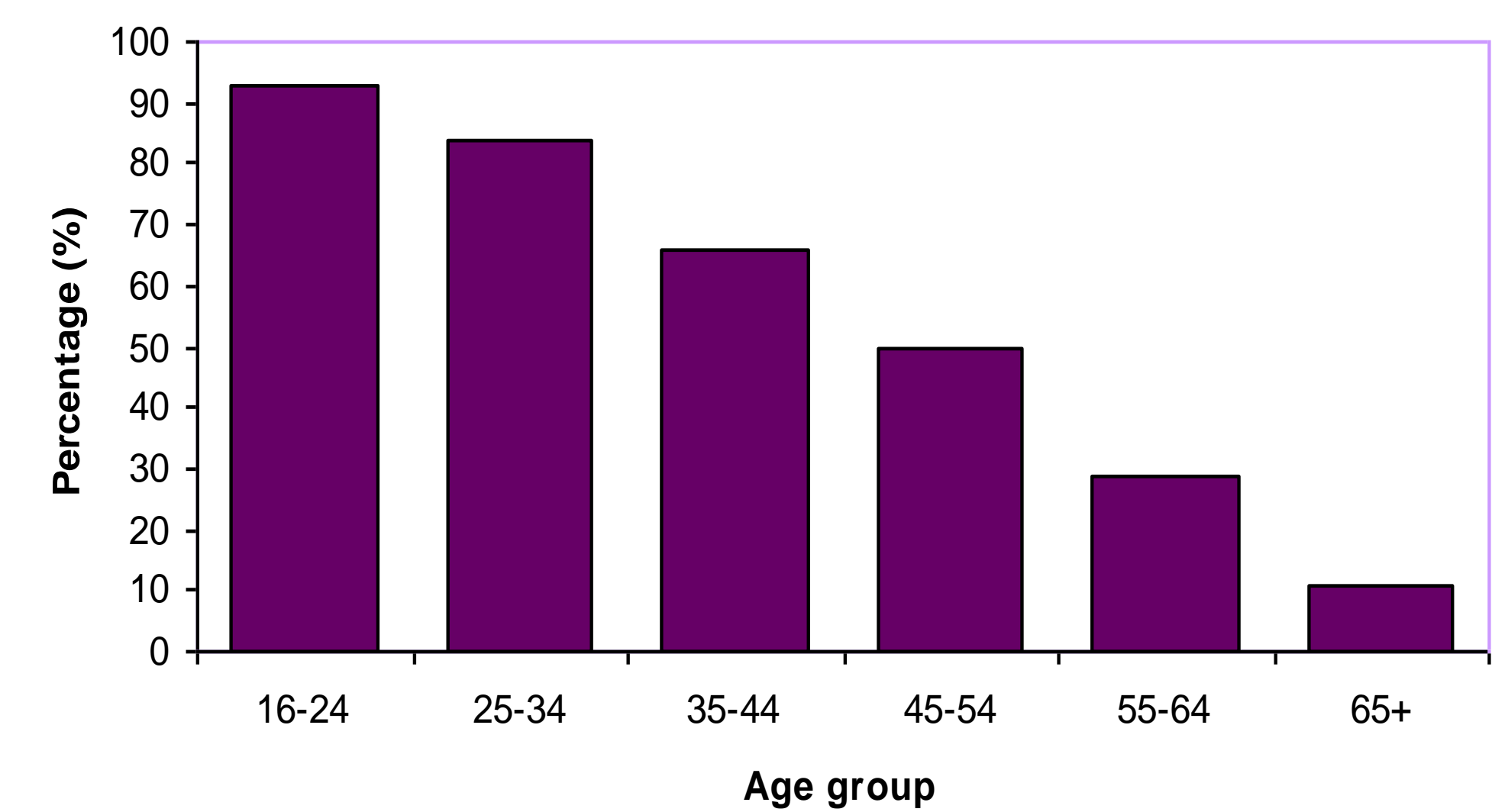


FIG. 1. Percentage of adults (16+) using Social networking by age-group in 2013 (ONS, 2013)

Following the approach adopted by Lloyd and Little (2010), the current study was designed to explore participants’ experiences of a supportive social network and the impact of this on their motivation to exercise. It adopted a theory-led approach, using SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000) as the underpinning theory. It utilises extant technology in delivering an intervention via social media, with the content of messages guided by SDT.

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METHOD

PARTICIPANTS Recreational runners aged over 20 were recruited via local *parkrun* Facebook pages. Seventeen participants (11 females and 6 males) agreed to take part in the study and all were aged 35 and over. A virtual control group was created to mirror (as far as practicable) the age, gender and *parkrun* run profiles of the participants in the study.

MEASURES AND PROCEDURES A closed Facebook group was chosen to host the intervention in order to provide a secure and confidential forum for discussion.. Motivational comments and questions designed around the 3 tenets of SDT (autonomy, competence and relatedness) were posted to the group over a 12 week period encouraging participant responses. Measures of interaction within the group (e.g., response frequency) were monitored. Responses by the participants to the Facebook posts were explored using inductive thematic analysis to identify factors appertaining to motivation.

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RESULTS

Three main themes emerged from qualitative analysis (see Fig. 2). A “sense of community” was evidenced by accounts of membership to other physical and virtual groups, and growing interaction within the Facebook community. The “feel good factor” was discussed in relation to the running ‘high’ and improvements in physical and mental wellbeing. “In pursuit of progress” was apparent through participants’ personal goals, comparisons with others, and exercise tracking methods.

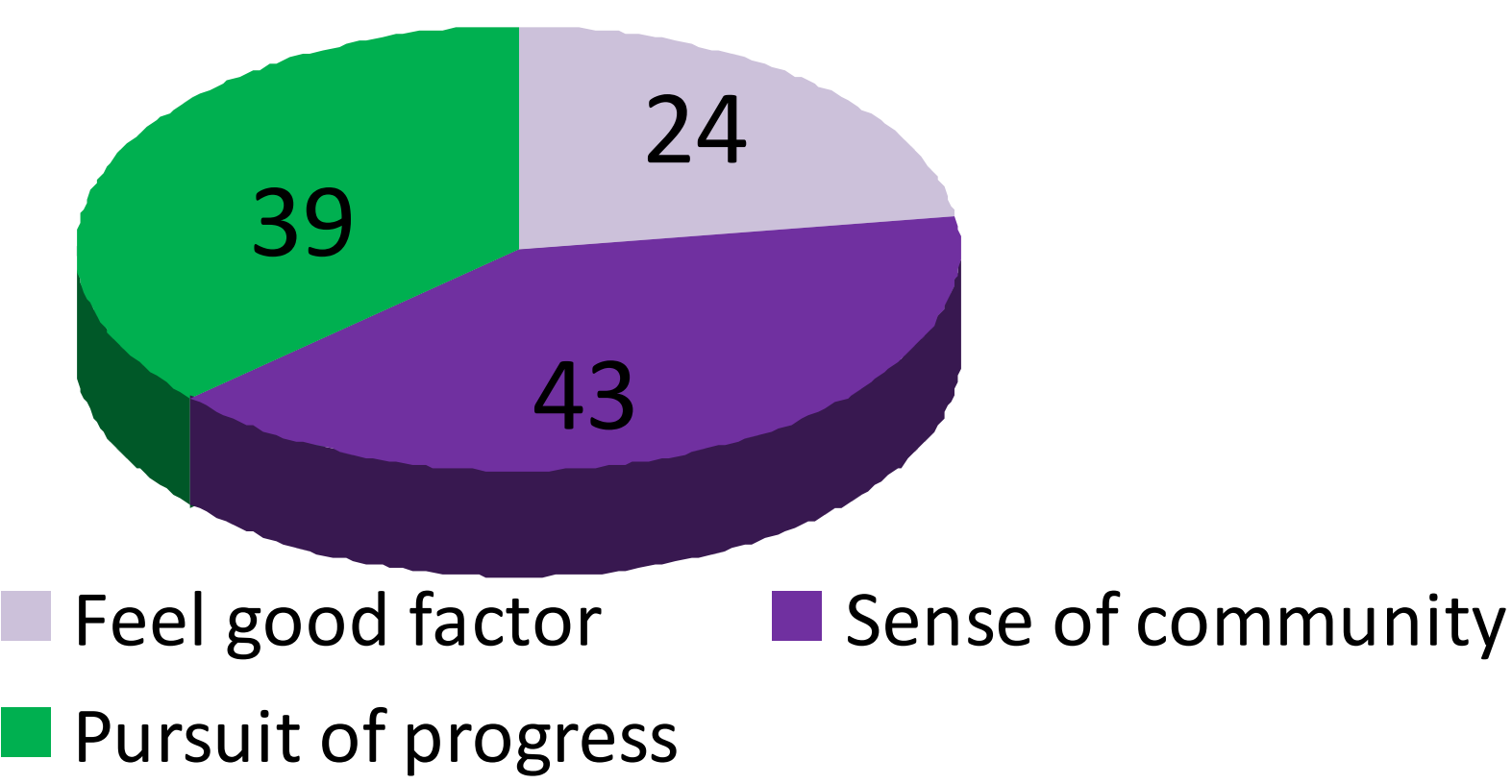


FIG. 2. Frequency of themes from participant Facebook posts

Sense of community
Participant A283825 and **42 others** liked this “Facebook has helped as I cannot see the blank looks on peoples faces as I tell them what I've been doing.”

Pursuit of progress
Participant A72661 and **38 others** liked this “Although slow, it was fast for me, and considering the weather conditions, it felt if I could finish that, I could do anything.”

Feel good factor
Participant A131728 and **23 others** liked this “I love the feeling of freedom and being outside, whatever the weather.”

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CONCLUSION

As an exploratory study, the results obtained suggested that this was an area worthy of future research. The study provided valuable feedback for using social media as an intervention or research delivery vehicle. The key considerations for future research design include appropriate selection of the participant population; effective process of obtaining participant consent; continued participant engagement; and creation of an autonomous-supportive environment within the group.

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